

Out of work and out of office: The golden mix for left bloc support in Norway*

by

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Abstract

Across established democracies, the relationship between the economy and party choice is robust. In efforts to test the relationship further, forecasting models based on economic and political variables have been constructed for many democracies, most notably in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This work has produced an effective body of theory and empirical research on predicting election outcomes before they happen. However, for certain other democracies, such as Norway, little or no election forecasting has been carried out. This paper draws on established relationships from the economic voting literature and tests for their presence in Norwegian politics. We find that the left bloc's vote share is sensitive to unemployment and whether or not they are in government. In line with the clientele hypothesis, the vote for the left has a positive relationship with unemployment figures. In addition, we find that being in office leads to a general depreciation of their vote share. The vote forecasting model constructed with these predictors is tested against and outperforms an AR(1) benchmark model for sequentially updated *ex post* predictions of the last ten Norwegian elections.

Why citizens vote the way they do has long been one of the core questions within political science. Three main research approaches to this question are the sociological model (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970), the socio-psychological model (Campbell et al. 1960), and the rational choice model (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). One of the main differences between the theories is whether they believe citizens cast their votes based on continuously updated information about the match between their own political preferences and the options they have to choose from at the polls, or are habitual voters more attached to their own historical voting record rather than to developments in society. No doubt, both types of voters and everything in between are present among the electorate. Consistent findings across polities and elections do however show that the economy is an important determinant of electoral outcomes (Duch and Stevenson 2008), and in this article we examine the effect of economic voting in Norwegian post Second World War elections.

The reward-punishment hypothesis states that voters reward parties in power if they are pleased with their achievements in office, and punish them otherwise (Key 1966). One of the key aspects of their evaluation relies on the state of the economy, and beginning with Goodhart and Bhansali (1970) and Kramer (1971), scholars have identified empirical relationships between aggregate electoral outcomes and the state of the economy. Various measures have been applied, where the most prominent among them are employment, inflation, and GDP growth (Keech 1995). For the Norwegian case, Aardal and Listhaug (1986)

reached the following conclusion based on data from the National Election Survey for 1965-1985:

Assesments of the ability of the government alternatives to control inflation and unemployment are more consistently linked to voting behavior, while the evaluation of the national economy through the past year does not have any impact on the changes in behavior at the polls. (Aardal and Listhaug 1986:21)

Not all economic voting relates to the achievements of the government, though. Historically, parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum have had a stronger focus on employment than those on the right (Hibbs 1977). Conversely, the non-socialist (right) parties maintain issue ownership on controlling inflation and fostering economic growth. This *clientele hypothesis* states that in times of economic prosperity voters will shift to the right, and when the economy is faltering and citizens fear for their jobs they will shift to the left (Carlsen 2000; Rattinger 1991; Swank 1993).

While the link between the economy and the vote is strong, other studies show that citizens do not really need the economy as an excuse to express their dissatisfaction with the government. Indeed, incumbency *as such* puts the party or parties in power out of favor with the electorate. As Norpoth (1991:143) writes, "... as long as people have chosen political leaders through some form of election, it has been noted, almost like a law of politics, that popularity diminishes

with time in office.” In Norway there is corresponding empirical evidence of a cost of rule (Midtbø 1999; Nannestad and Paldam 2002). The depreciation of incumbent support comes as high expectations of the newly elected leaders turns into citizen disillusionment as political decisions antagonize parts of the electorate (Mueller 1970). It is also possible that the voters simply have expectations towards the new government that the government cannot fulfill (Stimson 1976). An alternative explanation of the citizens’ perennial need for government change is that they change political preferences to keep the policy outcomes stable at the centre of the ideological space (Paldam and Skott 1995).

As a consolidated democracy with vast revenues from oil, Norway has some peculiarities that it does not share with comparable countries. Aardal and Listhaug (1986) note that Norway, due to active counter-cyclical policies from the government and growth impulse from the oil sector of a lesser degree than in other industrialized countries, suffered from the economic downturn in the mid-1970s. National revenues are positive and the last time the country experienced economic contraction was in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, few incumbent governments survive an election in Norway. Until it happened in 2009, no government had been reelected since 1993, in spite of the great economic prosperity witnessed in this period. Paradoxically, after the financial crisis struck in 2009, the government held on to power. Jenssen and Kalstø (2011) hypothesize that the two former incumbent governments in 2001 and 2005 suffered from rising economic expectations which they were unable to satisfy,

while in 2009 the citizens had witnessed through the media a global financial meltdown which they believed would strike Norway as well. In some economic sectors it did, but an overall downturn failed to materialize, and citizens approved of the government's efforts to mitigate the national impact of the global crisis (Narud 2011). The "lowered expectations" explanation does not discard the link between the economy and the vote, but instead suggests that the objective economic numbers may be perceived differently depending on the context. Economic growth may be lower than for previous periods, but if the voters' expectations also have been lowered, the party or parties in government will not necessarily be punished for slower growth.

Over time, however, if there is a connection between the economy and the vote, then it should appear as an empirical relationship between objective assessments of the state of the economy, such as unemployment, GDP growth, inflation, or other measurable barometers of economic development. Since Tufte (1978), the link between the economy and the vote has been tested against the ability of economic indicators to forecast election outcomes. Coupled with political variables, such as party identification, incumbency, and war/peace conditions, scholars have constructed models which measure their *ex post* forecast accuracy of past elections. Pushing the test of the relationship further, Lewis-Beck (1984) put the models to the ultimate test by forecasting *ex ante* the outcome of upcoming elections. Today there exist forecasting models for many established democracies, and they continue to proliferate (Bélanger et al. 2004). Such a vote

forecasting model has yet to be published for the case of Norway, so that is our goal for this paper.

Norwegian Party Blocs: The Left vs. the Rest

The Norwegian party system is a multiparty system. Today there are seven parties in parliament, and they have all been present in parliament for the main part of the post-war period. With the exception of the Progressive Party, which is a relatively new populist right party, all parties have had government experience. Even though several combinations of government parties have existed, it is fair to say that the parties can be pooled into blocs of parties for analytical purposes. In the literature on the Norwegian party system, it is common to divide them into two or three blocs, either as Left/Right, or Left/Center/Right (Lipset and Rokkan 1967:402; Ringdal and Hines 1995; Aardal and Listhaug 1986). Regardless of whether the Norwegian party system consists of two or three blocs, it remains that there is a clear divide between the left and the rest. The left is a clear theoretical, empirical, and perceptual concept in Norwegian politics, and voters should be able to distinguish the left parties from the other parties. The Left bloc has been represented in parliament by Labour, The Socialist Left Party, The Communist Party (NKP), the Red Party, and – since 2005 – the Centre Party. The Centre Party is the agrarian party in Norway, and they have mainly been regarded as a center or right of center party. Their position on the left-right scale has, however, drifted towards the left (McDonald et al. 2007), and in 2005 they joined the left government coalition. The left has been in power in 395 out of the 396

months. In other words, they have held a majority in parliament in eight four-year periods plus the current period.¹

The non-left parties are arguably distributed over a wider scope on the policy space than the left parties are, perhaps suffering from the fact that there are more non-left parties. The dominant party of the right are the Conservatives (Høyre), and they have been in power in all but two of the non-left government periods. The exception occurred in 1972-1973 and in 1997-2000, when the three centrist parties the Christian's People Party (*Kristelig Folkeparti*), the Liberals (Venstre), and the Centre Party (*Senterpartiet*) formed minority coalition governments. Formed in 1973 the populist right Progressive Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*) has won an increasing number of votes, and has in the recent decade competed with the Conservatives in being the most popular non-left party. They have as of yet not held government positions though, possibly for tactical reasons, but also potentially because the parties on the centre/right have had difficulties in reaching a common political platform. Whatever the reason, the non-left parties have not been equally able to stay in government whenever there was a non-left majority in parliament. Out of the 384 months (eight four-year periods) where a non-left majority has prevailed, only 222 of them have been ruled by a non-left government. In other words, while the seat majority has been near equally shared

¹ The one month exception happened in 1963, when the Socialist Left backed a vote of no confidence from the opposition because of the *King's Bay* mining accident in Svalbard, where the government was blamed for having failed to maintain sufficient security for the miners. A new Labour government was reinstated one month later, though, with the support of Socialist Left.

between the two blocs, the left has been in power for almost three times as many months.

When we create our dependent variable, we include the vote share of the left parties which have held at least one seat in parliament during the observation period.² The dependent variable includes observations of both aggregated local election results and national election results. Merging the two should be conceptually defensible as long as we include a dummy variable that accounts for differences between the local and national vote.

Alternating local and national elections take place with a biennial frequency. Elections have been held since 1885, but we consider the pre-war elections to be so different from present elections that they are better left out of the analysis in order to maintain relevance for the current political context. Hence, the observations start with the first post-war election in 1945, and continue with a two year frequency until the last election in 2009 (N=33).³

² The exception is the Centre Party. This party is excluded because their switch to the left bloc is relatively recent, which makes it problematic to incorporate into the time series analysis.

³ As a result of the end of the Second World War, both local and national elections were conducted in 1945. The local election for that year is excluded from the observations.

Figure 1

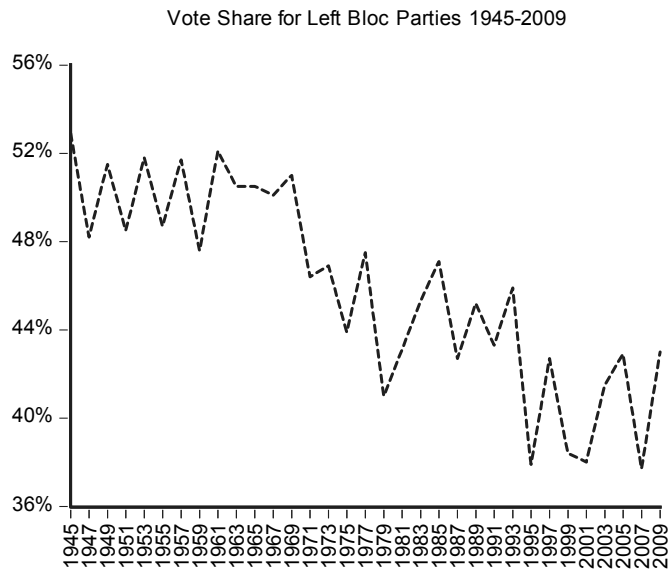


Figure 1 shows the support for the left bloc after 1945. In the first two decades after the Second World War, the Labour Party held a majority of the seats in the national parliament. This epoch is labelled the era of the one-party state. The communists were also flying high due to their resistance against the occupying Nazi forces during the war. Support for the left, however, was diminishing steadily from the outset, and has in recent years stabilized around 40 per cent (excluding the voters for the Centre Party). In general, the bloc receives fewer total votes in local elections than they do in national parliamentary elections.⁴

The Vote Model

⁴ See tables A and B in the appendix for a detailed overview of vote shares.

In addition to the local election dummy variable, the independent variables consist of a dummy variable for elections in which the left bloc is the incumbent bloc, annual unemployment figures measured in percentage of the work-eligible population in the election year, GDP growth in per cent per year as well as annual inflation rates in the election year, and an autoregressive component of the dependent variable to account for omitted variables such as party identification.⁵ We expect incumbency to have a negative impact on the vote because of the costs of rule. The socialist parties have historically had ownership over issues related to handling rising unemployment, so the relationship with the vote is expected to be positive. To test for a differential effect on incumbent and non-incumbent left parties from the economic measures, incumbency interaction effects with these variables are included in the model.

⁵ See online appendix for data and data sources: <http://folk.uib.no/st03889/>

Table 1: Model estimation	Dependent variable: Left bloc's vote share	
	<i>Full model</i>	<i>Final model</i>
Constant	45.06*** (5.92)	43.48*** (10.61)
Local election (dummy)	-3.12*** (-4.93)	-2.70*** (-6.05)
Incumbency	-2.46* (-1.33)	-1.59** (2.19)
Unemployment	1.17** (2.44)	0.70** (1.91)
Unemployment*Incumbency	-0.95** (-1.60)	
GDP growth	-0.36*** (-2.67)	
GDP growth*Incumbency	0.31* (1.55)	
Inflation	0.15 (0.82)	
Inflation*Incumbency	-0.11 (-0.46)	
AR(1)	0.92*** (14.7)	0.90*** (15.62)
Adjusted R ²	0.77	0.76
S.E.E	2.13	2.14
Akaike Info Criterion	4.61	4.47
Durbin-Watson	2.36	2.57
* p<0.10 ** p<0.05 *** p<0.001 one-tailed (t-values in parenthesis)		

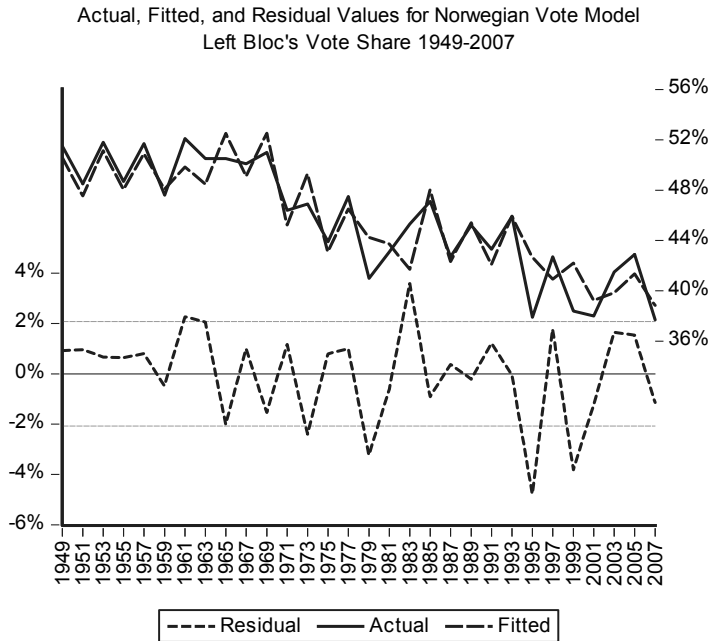
It is no surprise that the local election dummy variable and the AR(1) component are highly significant. In local elections, county party lists draw some voters away from the national parties, and this could explain the lower vote share of the left bloc in those elections. The AR(1) component is quite high. With a coefficient of .90, some might have preferred to difference the series in order to ensure the stationarity of the series. However, we refrain from doing this with a series

whose values theoretically can only vary between 0 and 100. In the long run, such a series cannot be non-stationary, as it has a finite variance and will be mean reverting (DeBoef and Granato 1997:623).⁶

The full model indicates that both economic growth and unemployment have effects on the vote in the direction we expected. When unemployment goes up, so does the popularity of the left. Conversely, when the economy prospers, the voters tend to support non-left parties to a higher degree than when growth is slower. The final model contains an unemployment variable and an incumbency variable with negative coefficients, as well as an AR(1) component and a dummy variable to separate local and national elections.

⁶ Also when the series are differenced, the variables remain significant, though. The residuals of *both* the differenced and the level models represent white noise. See the online appendix for more details: <http://folk.uib.no/st03889/>

Figure 2



The in-sample fit is quite good with regard to the standard error of the estimate and adjusted R^2 . To further determine whether the theoretically chosen variables of incumbency and unemployment contribute to the model's performance or whether the model solely relies on the local elections dummy and the autoregressive component, we apply them to forecast out-of-sample values for the last ten elections. The *ex post* forecasts are sequentially updated: that is, they have been forecasted by re-estimating the model from a sample which includes all observations up until the predicted election (Brandt et al. 2011). As a benchmark model, we forecast the same elections without any political or economic indicators, only the local elections dummy and the AR(1) component.

Table 2: *Ex Post* Out-of-Sample Vote Forecast

<i>Observations</i>	<i>Actual vote share</i>	<i>Final model</i>	<i>Benchmark model</i>
1991	43.3	0.1	0.3
1993	45.9	0.1	-0.4
1995	37.9	5.6	-5.7
1997	42.7	-3.7	1.5
1999	38.4	2.9	-2.0
2001	38	2.5	-3.8
2003	41.5	-4.8	6.3
2005	42.9	-1.2	-1.6
2007	37.7	0.1	-3.1
2009	43.0	-2.0	2.0
RMSE	-	3.0	3.3
MAE	-	2.3	2.7
Largest error	-	5.6	6.3
Theil's U	-	0.61	0.71

Our final model clearly outperforms the benchmark model with respect to the root mean square error (RMSE) and the mean absolute error (MAE), indicating that the economy indeed is a factor to account for. Also, Theil's inequality coefficient confirms the superiority of the final model. Theil's (1966) U coefficient is a benchmark used for comparing the predictions with the predictions of no change. If there is no error in the predictions, then $U = 0$, and if the model

predictions are as bad or worse than the forecast of no change, then $U \geq 1$. All in all, the final model accounts for and predicts the variation on our dependent variable most accurately, and stands out as the winner. Certainly the autoregressive component is very important, but the analysis shows that the model is improved when we take the state of the economy and the cost of ruling into consideration. However, it has not yet been put up to the hardest test, which is the accuracy of the *ex ante* forecast of a parliamentary election. This evaluation will have to wait until 2013.

Discussion

Lewis-Beck and Tien (2008) suggest an evaluation of the forecasting model based on four criteria, namely accuracy, lead time, parsimony, and reproducibility. Regarding the latter, all the data are publicly available and consistently updated, giving every opportunity for others to check the model estimates. In terms of parsimony, four independent variables ought to be regarded as quite low. As the model is estimated on unemployment numbers for the same year as the election, it is a conditional forecasting model which will have to rely on anticipated unemployment numbers and not real figures. The lead time of the model, then, depends on when one is confident that these figures are accurately predicted. If these numbers turn out to be wrong, it could distort the model's ability to predict the *ex ante* vote in coming elections. We will have to wait to know how it performs *ex ante*, but obviously, conditional forecasts are less appealing than unconditional forecasts, so this is a weakness with the model. Finally, accuracy is

a relative term, but when measured against the naïve benchmark of a “no change” *ex post* forecast, the model is considerably more accurate, and compared to the non-economic autoregressive model, it improves the forecasts by 15 per cent, on average. Overall, we are happy with a forecast which, historically speaking, has predicted the vote with a mean absolute error of 2.3 percentage points.

A more general word of caution against our model is that it bases its forecast on previous elections. Each election has its own peculiarities, and unpredictable events may overturn forecasts (Sanders 1995). Norway – a nation which suffered from terror attacks on the government buildings in Oslo and the Labour Party’s youth camp just weeks before the 2011 local elections – experienced an election campaign that was quite out of the ordinary. The campaign was shortened, and the tone of the discourse between the political parties was much less confrontational than has been the norm in recent elections. Also, some issues – particularly the contentious immigration and integration issues – received very little attention. When the result was ready, the Labour Party had gained votes since the last local election, and the radical right Progressive Party had receded quite acutely. The media and political pundits speculated that Labour benefitted from sympathy and/or mobilization effects, while the Progressives were punished for the opposite reasons. As for the party blocs, however, their relative strengths did not alter significantly. Since the forecast model depends heavily on the election outcome of the last election, a deviating election might distort the

forecast. Whether or not the 2011 election was a deviating election will only be known once we have the result of the next election in 2013.

Despite its outlier status as an oil-rich, consolidated democracy, the aggregate vote in Norway is sensitive to similar factors as those of other democracies. The aggregate vote for the parties on the left of the ideological spectrum increases when citizens fear for their jobs. The fact that national unemployment stands out as perhaps the most fundamental economic variable concurs with international literature (Kiewiet 1983; Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000; Wlezien and Erikson 2004). Once the parties take office, however, they receive very little in the way of gratitude from the electorate. The conclusion of our analysis, therefore, is that while left parties work hard to win office and to reduce unemployment, success at the polls is achieved by staying out of office, and is most pronounced when citizens are out of work.

Appendix

Table A: Left Bloc Parties and Their National Vote Share 1945-2009.

<i>Election Year</i>	<i>Left bloc total</i>	<i>Labour Party</i>	<i>Communist Party and Red Party</i>	<i>Socialist Left</i>
1945	52.9	41	11.9	-
1949	51.5	45.7	5.8	-
1953	51.8	46.7	5.1	-
1957	51.7	48.3	3.4	-
1961	52.1	46.8	2.9	2.4
1965	50.5	43.1	1.4	6.0
1969	51	46.5	1	3.5
1973	46.9	35.3	.4	11.2
1977	47.5	42.3	1.0	4.2
1981	43.1	37.1	1.0	5
1985	47.1	40.8	.8	5.5
1989	45.2	34.3	.8	10.1
1993	45.9	36.9	1.1	7.9
1997	42.7	35	1.7	6.0
2001	38	24.3	1.2	12.5
2005	42.7	32.7	1.2	8.8
2009	43.0	35.4	1.4	6.2

Source: (Aardal 2011a)

**Table B: Left Bloc Parties and Their Local County Aggregate
Vote Share 1947-2007.**

<i>Election Year</i>	<i>Left bloc total</i>	<i>Labour Party</i>	<i>Communist Party and Red Party</i>	<i>Socialist Left</i>
1947	48.2	38.2	10.0	-
1951	48.5	42.4	6.1	-
1955	48.7	43.4	5.3	-
1959	47.6	43.7	3.9	-
1963	50.5	45.8	1.9	2.8
1967	50.1	43.8	1.2	5.1
1971	46.4	41.7	0.7	4.0
1975	43.9	38.0	0.4	5.5
1979	41	35.9	1.0	4.1
1983	45.3	38.9	1.3	5.1
1987	42.7	35.9	1.3	5.5
1991	43.3	30.2	1.5	11.6
1995	37.9	30.5	1.5	5.9
1999	38.4	28.6	2.0	7.8
2003	41.5	27.5	1.6	12.4
2007	37.7	29.6	1.9	6.2
2011	37.3	31.7	1.5	4.1

Source: (Aardal 2011b)

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